

HELEN MAY MARTIN

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HOUSE FOR THE BLIND**



Helen May Martin

by L. W. Bdenberg.

In Professor Cutsforth's book, "The Blind in School and Society," we have hints of certain truths which may throw some light on the mystery which, to the casual observer, surrounds our present subject. In his chapter on Aesthetic Appreciation the author points out that anyone's sense of beauty is in direct relationship with what in effect amounts to his personality. It depends almost wholly on the understanding one has of the value of objective nature to human life, and the power to evaluate, interpret and express the emotions within himself and others. The more earnest one is in these appreciations the more he will reach out for them and build them into his experience. Limited as may be the objective stimuli in the sensory experience of the non-seeing, their enjoyment of beauty will largely depend on their self-orientation to it.

Like the blind, the deaf are shut out from much of the world of normal experience. We cannot attempt at this time to make an analysis of the subtle processes of language and other aural rehabilitations of the non-hearing. It is certain, however, that the personality force is a determining factor in filling the voids of deafness, just as it is in the case of blindness. The sense of rhythm, considered in its broadest aspect, is not barred from the deaf, and considered in its musical meaning is accepted as offering one of their strongest aesthetic appreciations. To one of normal sensory experience it is difficult to conceive how the pulsations and vibrations of rhythm and tone may be so acutely perceived and enjoyed without the sense of hearing. In a few instances among the deaf-blind this restricted sensory experience has developed to a remarkable extent. Certainly one of the most delightful and inspiring of these personalities is that of Helen May Martin, one of the esteemed readers of this magazine who has kindly given us her cooperation in presenting the following sketch of her life and work. We wish to take this opportunity of congratulating her on her truly inspiring achievements. She has been called a "second Helen Keller," but Miss Keller, who has made Miss Martin's acquaintance, herself says: "She is not a 'second' to me, for she has done what I could never do; she has made of herself an accomplished pianist and musician. She is the most accomplished deaf and blind person in the world."

As a result of a septic infection which affected both her eyes and ears, Helen May Martin became both blind and deaf about one week after she was born. As she grew up she learned to articulate after the fashion of instructed deaf people. Miss Martin's desire to do whatever was done by her sister and by the two cousins who once lived at her home was her first incentive to learn to play the piano. Whatever they did, Helen regarded as a game to be played along with them. When the cousins began to study music, the year Helen was seven, the latter, in her usual fashion, looked upon music lessons as a new kind of game and insisted on having a daily practice hour just as had the cousins.

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When Mrs. Martin saw that the new game was proving interesting to Helen and had even become something more serious than a game, she began to teach her to play little tunes. Her love of music was further increased by "listening" to her father play the piano. Realizing that if Helen were to have any real understanding of what her fingers were doing on the keyboard she must be capable of understanding the mechanics of music, Mrs. Martin undertook to explain musical theory to her small daughter by the use of various objects. Time value was taught by the aid of navy beans. Four beans on an improvised scale represented a whole note, two a half note, and one a quarter note. She found that Helen quickly grasped each idea.

However, a new interest came into Helen's life that somewhat interrupted her piano practising. That was school. She had already taught herself braille, but she was enrolled for special instruction at the School for the Deaf, at Olathe, Kansas. Within five years, despite her double handicap, she completed the course of instruction in 1917 with an average grade of 97.

Through with school, Helen returned to her music. The first bit of encouragement to make a serious study of it came from a blind piano tuner and musician who made a stop at Olathe. At the music store, half of which was occupied by Mrs. Martin's millinery shop, he heard Helen play. So enthusiastic was he that he gave her four lessons. Mrs. Martin had long believed that Helen was unusually talented; now urged by the piano tuner and friends who shared that opinion, she decided to provide training for her. Though the recently widowed milliner could not afford to send the girl to a city conservatory, she did arrange for her study under a local teacher.

Miss Martin made her first public appearance in a church at Olathe ten years ago. Due to a press notice of the recital which appeared in the Kansas City Star requests for recitals came from clubs and churches throughout the State. She was offered a scholarship and for a short time studied at a conservatory in Wichita, Kansas. Further study of music was made in Chicago and Cincinnati.

Her daily routine consists of several hours at the piano, learning new music and polishing old. In all she can play about a hundred numbers from memory, all classical. One interviewer explains her methods as follows:

"It's simple. Notice how she keeps her left foot pressed against the front board of the piano. In this way she gets the vibrations which gives her an idea of tone quality. That enables her to put expression into the music. A wrong note causes a discord in the vibrations and she quickly corrects it. You see, she hears and enjoys music not through her ears, as you do, but through touch -- that is, by means of the vibrations she receives through her foot. She listens to others play by placing her hands on the instrument."

Some of her time is spent in making additions to her music library with the aid of her mother. "Just now," she writes, "I am working on new pieces for my programs. It is not only trying but very hard. My mother has to dictate for me to translate into Point which is very slow work. It is a struggle for both of us and then, too, the music is difficult as I play classics mostly. I would not have so much trouble if I knew music braille. Most of what I want can be obtained in







that system." She is now learning music braille and likes it very much.

A visit to her home in Merriam, Kansas, would reveal that aside from her musical interests she is also a housekeeper, a student, a lover of books, and a typist. She can cook, tat, answer her letters on a typewriter, and is somewhat of an expert at raffia work.

"We bring everything to her, tell her everything that is good, but keep everything that is unpleasant and evil away from her," says her mother. "So, when it begins to hail, Gertrude, her sister, brings some of it in, knowing Helen will be thrilled by it, as she is by everything. If, instead of hailstones, those were the first dandelions and violets to bloom this Spring in our yard, Gertrude would pick them and hurry with them to Helen. She loves the flowers and grasses, the trees and everything that grows."

Among the wonderful things that have happened to her, Miss Martin says, was the gift of a small concert grand piano, made by a group of prominent Kansas City business men. "The gift of the piano," she writes, "was beautifully arranged as a surprise. I was playing, I thought, to help bring in club dates. When I finished I was told that the piano was mine. I only half believed it but I still have the piano. It was originated by Dr. Wear of Kansas City whom I had only known for a short time and who was married to a childhood friend of mine. Then Mr. Kent sent a wonderful radio specially made for me. It has a special attachment for carrying vibration which consists of an all-metal loud speaker the size and appearance of a clock. It stands on the radio or can be moved to a nearby stool. I get the vibrations just as plain by placing my palm on its face. Thought I know talking and voices I don't get the words. It helps in my own music, for just having my own playing makes it dull for me.

"A year ago a harp was given to me as a Christmas gift because the friend who gave it heard someone say at one of my programs that he would like to see me seated at a harp. It is a Clarke Irish baby grand. I learned to play it at a convent in Joliet where my mother and I were guests for three days. The only thing hard about the harp is finding the strings. Perhaps in time that will be as easy as the piano keyboard. I have done very little with it as I am severely handicapped for want of pieces in embossed form.

"Music reaches me through vibration, which, of course, is not the same as for hearing persons, but rather in a muffled sort of way. The explanation for my being a musician is simply that I am a lover of music and that even the absence of sight and hearing does not prevent my being a musician, though it may be only in a small way. I am not altogether independent in my choice of music because of my deafness. I have to have pieces played for me before I know if I like them and if they would be suitable for me. I seem best to express nature pieces, like Chopin's 'Raindrop Prelude', Nevin's 'Goodnight', and I play the first two movements of Beethoven's 'Moonlight Sonata'. I love McDowell, although the long stretches in most of his music are hard for my small hands. I cannot learn anything on the road but must go to Kansas City for a friend to help smooth out my new music."

Her recital tours made by automobile have taken her into many of the mid-







Western States. These tours are managed by her mother and prove of great interest to Miss Martin as she especially enjoys being out of doors.

"I have a young brother-in-law who now does the advanced work, but times must get better before we can hope for much greater success. We all love to travel and find many interesting places. We travel in a tiny Chevrolet which enables us to do as we please. One trip took us over a corner of Arkansas. It was both beautiful and of historic interest. I love the out-of-doors and I have a hobby of collecting rocks. I started only a little over a year ago and have an interesting collection already.

"You may know, of course, that without hearing I have to resort to reading so as not to be lonely. I take about a dozen magazines and get books from several libraries when I am staying still long enough to have them sent to me."

After an interview with Miss Martin, Dr. Karol Liszniewski of the Artists' Faculty of the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music said: "She seems to get some definite musical impressions and emotions through vibrations of the tones produced on the piano. She recognized a piece I played for her. She 'listens' by putting her hand on the piano, and the expression of her face shows clearly signs of emotions and pleasure. If she does not like the music she withdraws her hand from the piano. She played McDowell's 'To A Wild Rose', Chopin's 'Preludes', in C Minor and D Flat Major, and the first movement of Beethoven's 'Moonlight Sonata' -- all with astonishing sense of the rhythm and hardly any mistakes. What she does is quite extraordinary, and gives her great pleasure. What a divine thing is music, if it can make even deaf people happy!"







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